



JetBlue flight attendant Steven Slater: a folk hero in a down economy

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Janet Cho, The Plain Dealer



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Associated Press

JetBlue flight attendant Steven Slater leaves a correctional facility in the Bronx after posting bail Tuesday in New York.

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- A lot of us apparently want to be like flight attendant Steven Slater -- grabbing a beer or two and zipping down the emergency chute away from our jobs.

In an economy that has limited our work choices, the JetBlue employee has become an overnight social media sensation. He has more than 170,000 fans on more than 100 Facebook pages, ranging from "Steven Slater is my Hero" to "I want Steven Slater to be my flight attendant."

Several songwriters, including Late Night host Jimmy Fallon, have written odes in his honor.

And thousands have reTweeted what one flight attendant told The Washington Post: that Slater is "the Thelma and Louise of flight attendants."

"He's become this folk hero to people who are mistreated at their jobs, whether it be by their boss or by the customers they have to deal with," said David Steiner, a labor and employment lawyer with The Lazzaro Law Firm in Cleveland.

"I'll bet several thousand of his fans on facebook are probably service industry workers who can totally relate to what he had to deal with."

Slater's story made Stephen Betting, a cleveland.com reader, recall the time he quit his job at a little bar and bowling alley.

He was so furious with his boss that while she was out for a few minutes, "I wrote a lovely little note telling her what a cold-hearted you-know-what she was, plus quite a few other colorful, choice words," Betting said in an e-mail.

"I then left that on the register in the bar with my key to the place and left."

Former Ohioan Jeff Alexander once quit a job at a greenhouse in Apopka, Fla., after seeing the boss berate a coworker who had taken time off to visit her dying sister.

"I tossed the keys on my boss' desk and told him to 'take a flying leap through a rolling doughnut,' " said Alexander, who now works in Orlando. "He actually spent the rest of the afternoon calling my cell and asking me to come back. . . . It feels good just reliving that episode in my life."

On Monday, a JetBlue passenger cursed out Slater and hit him in the head while opening the overhead compartment door. When she failed to apologize, he grabbed the intercom, fired off some expletives of his own, grabbed the beers and pulled the emergency chute.

Slater was suspended from his job, arrested and charged with reckless endangerment, criminal mischief and trespassing. He was released from jail after posting \$2,500 bail.

Janet Sharp, a psychoanalyst and psychotherapist in private practice in Cleveland Heights, said frustrated and angry workers embrace Slater because he represents how they feel about the economy.

If your job is threatened, your hours are cut or you can't provide for your family as you used to, your job anxiety can become tremendous, said Sharp, a clinical instructor of psychiatry at Case University Hospitals Medical Center School of Medicine. If the stress isn't diffused, it could cause problems.

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Slater's behavior represents the increased anxiety all employees feel in this economy, said Laura Hertzog, director of the professional development program at Cornell University in New York City.

"Many employees feel that not only are they being expected to 'do less with more' - an expression that many find simultaneously laughable and insulting - but they are afraid to complain about these additional burdens for fear of losing their jobs in a shaky economy," she said.

[**The New York Times**](#)

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"The resulting resentment over being expected to do more for no pay, but only increased responsibility and stress, is causing more and more employees to feel close to exploding," Herzog said. This is especially true of people with jobs like Slater's, expected to remain cheerful while coping with complaining customers.

Steiner's practice represents people in cases of wrongful firing, civil rights violations and sexual harassment. A growing number of workers feel abused by unsupportive employers, he said.

"When the job market is this bad and you've got an excess supply of workers, that makes workers more disposable to their employers," he said.

Even worse, businesses have become so competitive that "they're willing to tolerate bad customers in order to keep them." Restaurants and stores that in better days might have told rude customers to take a hike are now coddling them, putting even more stress on harried front-line workers.

Sharp said she understands why some unhappy workers might fantasize about pulling their own emergency chutes.

"I think there are people who secretly wish they could do what he did, but most people wouldn't really be pleased with themselves if they did," she said.

Slater's behavior did not impress Pat Perry, president of ERC (formerly the Employers Resource Council) in Mayfield.

"So the guy was frustrated and fed up," Perry said. "If he really felt that way, quite honestly he could've just gotten off the plane and resigned."

What good did it do to cuss over the intercom? he asked. "Nobody wants to hear that. What if there were children on the plane?" Perry said.

"I'm glad he wasn't from Northeast Ohio."

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